



# “Behavior that Endangers”: Analyzing Preschool and Childcare Expulsion and Suspension Policies

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## Abstract

Expulsion is the harshest form of disciplinary action, and behavior policies are the foundation for this decision-making process. The purpose of this study is to uncover how behavior policies used in early childhood settings describe expulsion practices. Among the 111 early childhood programs in Western Massachusetts that met the search criteria for this study, only 31 programs posted their behavior policies online. Twenty four of the 31 programs contained sections on expulsion and suspension in their behavioral policies. Data from the expulsion and suspension section of behavioral policies from 24 preschool and childcare programs were analyzed using content analysis. Themes related to *child* (e.g., child-behavior), *program* (e.g., goodness of fit), and *family* (e.g., communication) were found. The behavioral policies lacked detailed information about the expulsion process, which allows for the misuse of expulsion as a form of behavior management. Based on the results, implications for future research and practice on early childhood expulsion are discussed.

**Keywords** Early childhood education · Preschool · Childcare · Expulsion · Behavior policy

The recent attention on preschool and childcare expulsion sparked an increase in research on how the process of expulsion unfolds, and how expulsion rates can be reduced (O’Grady & Ostrosky, 2023). Expulsion refers to the total removal of a student from the district in which they are enrolled (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006). Suspension, a less severe form of punishment, is defined as a short-term removal from the classroom setting, such as sending a child home early due to their challenging behaviors (Clayback & Hemmeter, 2021; Zeng et al., 2019). A landmark study by Gilliam (2005) discovered that preschool expulsion rates in public schools were three times the rates for K-12 settings. In 2016, data from the National Survey of Children’s Health estimated that approximately 17,000 public Pre-K students had been expelled (Malik, 2017). That number does not take into account expulsions from childcare centers; therefore, the actual number of preschool aged children expelled could be significantly larger.

Expulsions in a preschool and childcare setting can occur for various reasons (e.g., failure to pay tuition or parent behavior). However, research has demonstrated that most children were recommended for expulsion due to challenging behavior (Hooper & Schweicker, 2020). Thus, this study is concerned with expulsions resulting from children’s challenging behavior, and not their parents’ behavior. Challenging behaviors refers to any repeated pattern of behavior that disrupts or has the potential to disrupt children’s learning and development and their interactions with others, such as hitting, screaming, running away, throwing things, and defiance (Martin et al., 2018; Smith and Fox, 2003). However, it is important to note that an adult’s interpretation of a child’s behavior as challenging, may be linked to the adults’ racial and cultural expectations (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). When the response to these behaviors is to remove the child from their access to support and resources in the classroom, all aspects of the child’s well-being are at risk (Giordano et al., 2021). The risks associated with expulsion include interference with the child’s attachment to teachers and peers, which could impede their social and emotional development (Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). Expulsion can also increase risk of future academic failure (American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on School Health, 2013) and a likelihood of engaging in criminal activity (Mallett, 2017). Therefore,

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this study aims to examine how expulsion and suspension practices are described in behavior policies in preschool and childcare settings.

## Behavior Policy

A critical component of preschool and childcare expulsion is the written policy, which exists across different types of preschool and childcare programs (e.g., Head Start, faith-based, or Montessori programs). These policies serve as the foundation for the decision-making process related to a child's enrollment status (O'Grady & Ostrosky, 2023) and shape the program's attitude and beliefs toward expulsion (Garrity et al., 2016). Research has established that a consistent implementation of high-quality behavior policies results in less challenging behaviors (Longstreth et al., 2013). High quality and effective behavior policies consist of a clear set of guiding principles that support children's social and emotional development (Garrity et al., 2017; Quesenberry et al., 2011). Expulsion is not considered to be a component of effective behavior management, as it can increase a child's risk for negative outcomes both in academic and behavior areas (Skiba et al., 2014). Additionally, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education (2014) issued a policy statement, which emphasized the need to remove suspension and expulsion from ECE policies. Yet, expulsion still exists at the core of these policies, despite its proven ineffectiveness. Therefore, it becomes necessary to understand how expulsions are rooted in the behavior policies of preschool and childcare programs to begin to decrease, and ultimately eliminate, the reliance on exclusionary discipline practices.

The lack of uniformity and "non-system" (i.e., no overarching funding or governance) across the field of early childhood education (ECE), specifically regarding written behavior policies, has made the use of preschool and childcare expulsions exceedingly difficult to mitigate (Garrity et al., 2016). Even when an overarching piece of state legislation designed to reduce expulsion passed, program administrators in Illinois admitted that the legislation would not prompt them to make changes to the behavior policies of their respective programs (Silver et al., 2021). Additionally, few studies have examined the different ECE behavior policies and the influence they have on program actions related to expulsion. These studies focused specifically on the quality of behavior policies in the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accredited programs (Garrity et al., 2016, 2017), Head Start (Quesenberry et al., 2011), and Arizona state-licensed early childcare programs (Longstreth et al., 2013). Within these studies, expulsion was mentioned as a behavior management technique or

as a component of the behavior policy, however, expulsion was not the main focus of these studies. For example, Quesenberry et al. (2011) evaluated the overall quality of Head Start behavior policies and their results showed that expulsion occurred in response to challenging behaviors, despite having a written statement prohibiting expulsion.

Another study by Longstreth et al. (2013) contributed to the development of the *Early Childhood Discipline Policy Essentials Checklist (EC-DPEC)* designed to assess the quality of ECE discipline policies based on a framework of the essential features of a high-quality policy (i.e., clear writing, promoting collaboration with families, and including developmentally appropriate expectations and interventions). Results from this study indicated that most ECE programs in Arizona met less than half of the criteria for a high-quality behavior policy. Both the *EC-DPEC* and the essential features framework created by Longstreth et al. (2013) set the foundation for future studies. For example, Garrity et al. (2016) developed the *Teaching and Guidance Policies Essentials Checklist (TAGPEC)*, which is an updated version of the *EC-DPEC* and essential features framework to analyze behavior policies of NAEYC accredited ECE programs. Findings from this study indicated that behavior policies from the NAEYC accredited programs were generally not of high quality and the *TAGPEC* is an effective analytical tool to measure the quality of behavior policies. In a follow up study, Garrity et al. (2017) expanded on previous work by replicating research with the *TAGPEC* with minor changes, such as revising the 2-point rating scale to a 3-point rating scale to allow for more accurate responses. Results demonstrated that use of evidence-based, preventative, and proactive behavior management strategies (e.g., ecological arrangements, redirection, and positive reinforcement) within the behavior policies of NAEYC accredited programs was limited.

## Purpose of the Study

Parents consider many factors when choosing a prospective childcare or preschool program for their young children. Public availability of the program information, including parent handbooks and behavioral policies, provides insight into the program. It also allows parents to better evaluate the quality of the preschool or childcare program (Doolittle et al., 2007). This is especially important for parents who have had children previously expelled from a childcare setting and are looking for a new program. ECE educators are responsible for supporting families by helping them strengthen their skills, such as strategies to address their child's challenging behaviors, and these educator-family partnerships are vital to a child's development (Division for

Early Childhood [DEC], 2017; Fetting et al., 2013). However, expulsions based on challenging behaviors are in direct conflict with this goal, as they hinder opportunities to build supportive and collaborative partnerships with families.

Given the important roles of behavioral policies in ECE settings and their potential influences on young children and their families, the purpose of this study is to uncover the extent to which behavior policies of community-based ECE settings (i.e., Head Start, Montessori, faith-based programs, and other group care settings) describe expulsion and suspension practices and the availability of the information to the public. In this study, expulsion is defined as the removal of a child from their program in response to that child's challenging behaviors, not for any other reasons, such as a failure of parents to pay tuition or parents' failure to provide the necessary medical documents. Suspension is defined as the short-term removal of a child from their classroom environment due to challenging behaviors, such as sitting in the office with administrative staff or joining a different classroom for the afternoon. The following questions guided this study:

- (1) To what degree do preschool and childcare programs post their behavior policies on their website?
- (2) How do preschool and childcare programs frame expulsion and suspension in their behavior policies?
- (3) What are the similarities and differences in the content of expulsion and suspension policy statements across the preschool and childcare programs?

## Method

### Settings

#### Preschool and Childcare Programs

To obtain relevant behavior policies, a search for licensed childcare settings on the Massachusetts Government Education website was conducted in June 2021 ([https://eeclead.force.com/EEC\\_ChildCareSearch](https://eeclead.force.com/EEC_ChildCareSearch)). This website does not include preschool programs in public school settings. The search included childcare settings within a 20-mile radius of three geographically separate western Massachusetts cities and towns (e.g., one from the northeast, west, and southern portions of western Massachusetts). The cities and towns chosen provided the most geographical coverage with the least overlap. Based on this search, a total of 1,468 licensed childcare programs were found.

The three lists were then reviewed based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) located in western Massachusetts, (b) listed under preschool, childcare or school, (c) held a

valid website operated by the program (i.e., not a third-party website, such as Care.com, Wee Care, Neighbor School or LinkedIn), and (d) included children from 3 to 5 years old in their programs. After first removing programs that were listed multiple times due to multiple sites, programs that appeared on more than one list due to an overlap in search area, and programs that were not preschools, childcare centers, or schools (e.g., Taekwondo programs), a total of 882 programs remained. The 882 programs were then reviewed for valid websites and ages of children served. There were 151 programs that held valid websites. Of those 151 programs, 40 programs did not serve children ages 3–5. A total of 111 preschool or childcare programs met the inclusion criteria.

## Procedures

### Behavioral Policies

Each website of the 111 preschool and childcare programs was reviewed for the availability of a behavioral policy. Since each website layout varied across programs, every section of the website (i.e., forms, parent information, handbook, etc.) was reviewed to ensure that no behavior policy was missed. Each author independently reviewed all the 111 program websites and checked whether the programs posted their behavioral policies. Then, results were compared. The researchers discussed several discrepancies by showing where they found a behavioral policy in a specific program website. Through these procedures, 31 of the 111 (27.93%) programs were found to post behavioral policies. Most of the programs posted behavioral policies as part of their Parent Handbook or made a separate section for a behavior policy on their program websites. Those behavior policies found were then carefully reviewed to identify whether they contained sections of the expulsion (also referred to as termination) and suspension policy. As the structure of each behavior policy varied (i.e., some policies had subheadings for different topics, like expulsion, and others did not), it was necessary to read the entire policy to identify the section describing expulsion and suspension. During the initial reading, sections pertaining to expulsion and/or suspension was highlighted. Through this process, the researchers found that 24 of the 31 (77.42%) programs contained sections for expulsion (termination) and suspension in their behavioral policies or the parent handbooks. During the second reading of the policies, the researchers re-read the entire behavior policies from 31 programs and double checked the availability of the expulsion and suspension policies from the 24 programs. Based on the purpose of this study to examine how expulsion and suspension were described in the behavior policies, sentences that were not related to the topics of

this study were removed. For example, “children may be suspended or terminated for non-payment of tuition” was removed, as expulsion is defined as “the removal of a child from a program in response to that child’s challenging behaviors” in this study. Then, the expulsion (termination) and suspension sections from the 24 programs were organized using a word table for the data analysis of this study. The number of words for the expulsion and suspension section from each program was also noted in the table to compare the lengths of the descriptions across the 24 programs.

### Demographic Information

Each of the 24 program websites were also reviewed to identify their program type (i.e., Head Start, Montessori, faith-based, etc.) and community type (i.e., rural, urban, or suburban). The program type was determined either by the title of the program (i.e., it included the word “Montessori” or “Head Start”) or by reviewing the program’s philosophy, mission, or about statements (i.e., for religious affiliation). Of the 24 programs, 17 programs did not indicate their program type and the remaining 7 programs included one Head Start program, two Montessori schools, and four faith-based programs. The program’s community type was established via the Massachusetts Metropolitan Area Planning Council’s (2008) designation for the town the preschool or childcare center was in or adjacent town for villages and unincorporated towns, which were not on the planning council’s list. The planning council defines urban areas as having high population density, suburban areas as having moderate population density with room to grow, and rural areas as low and scattered population with little growth. The council used subgroups to further delineate urban and suburban designations, however, for the purpose of this study, just the urban, suburban, or rural categories were used.

### Data Analysis

The expulsion and suspension sections of the behavior policies were analyzed using the content analysis procedures outlined by Johnson and LaMontagne (1993). Johnson and LaMontagne defined content analysis as the process of systematically breaking down communication into distinct categories to reveal its meaning. Content analysis allows the researcher to examine how objects, people, and events are portrayed in written or oral communication while maintaining the actual language used, which aligns with the purpose of this study (i.e., how behavior policies frame expulsion). The content analysis method outlined by Johnson and LaMontagne includes six steps: (a) prepare data for analysis, (b) become familiar with the data, (c) identify units of analysis, (d) define tentative categories for coding the

responses, (e) refine categories, and (f) establish category integrity. This method has been used by researchers in the field of early childhood education (Meyer et al., 2016; Park and Ostrosky, 2014; Yu and Park, 2020).

For *preparing the data for analysis*, only the sections on expulsion (or termination) and suspension policies from the 24 programs were typed into a word file and included for data analysis. The two researchers independently checked the accuracy of the data entry. To *become familiar with the data*, the typed policy sections were reread, and notes were typed directly on the document. Then, the researchers independently read all data to *identify units of analysis* by bracketing the policy statements from each program. A unit of analysis represented a single, distinct theme in a statement. For example, a childcare program described, “If a child is *not able to function* in a group setting, or *the program is not able to meet the needs of a particular child*, the program may ask the family to withdraw the child.” This statement includes two distinctly different points in one sentence: “A child is not able to function” and “the program is not able to meet the needs of the child.” Thus, this sentence was separated into two units. Each program’s policy statements addressed various themes. In most cases, several sentences focused on one specific theme, but a decision was made to separate the sentence into multiple units of analysis when it included more than one distinct theme. The researchers discussed each unit of analysis to identify emerging categories, which reflected the distinct and unique themes found in the policy statements. Through this process, *tentative categories for coding* the policy statements were identified and definitions for each category were developed.

Once the tentative categories and definitions were developed, the two researchers independently sorted all responses into the established tentative categories and then compared their results. When there were discrepancies in their results, the researchers discussed the units and categories to resolve differences and reach consensus. Following this process, the *categories and definitions were refined*, and the researchers re-sorted the data to ensure that revisions to categories and definitions yielded consistency in sorting between the two researchers. Once the researchers were confident with the categories with definitions, they reread all data for each category and reached consensus on the coding to ensure that they were placed in the appropriate categories.

In order to *establish category integrity*, a doctoral student who was a former elementary teacher and had ample experience using qualitative research methods served as a reliability coder. The coder was trained on the categories and definitions using 10% of the comments that were randomly selected from each category. The coder was asked to sort the policy statements (units of data analysis) into the appropriate categories. Percent agreement was calculated as

the number of agreements divided by the total number of agreements and disagreements (McHugh, 2012). Inter-rater agreement from the training was 83.33%. After the training was completed, another 20% of the comments from each category were randomly selected for reliability coding and the inter-rater agreement was 85%. The researchers discussed all disagreements identified during the reliability process, including disagreements (e.g., clarifications for definitions of program efforts and communication) that occurred during training and consensus was reached on the appropriate code for each comment. Feedback from the coder was also reflected in refining the definitions of the sub-categories.

## Results

### Demographic Information

Of the 24 programs with expulsion (termination) and suspension sections in their behavior policies, there was one Head Start program (4.17%), two Montessori schools (8.33%), and four faith-based programs (16.67%). The remaining 17 programs (70.83%) did not indicate their program type. For the community type, two thirds of the programs ( $n = 16/24$ , 66.67%) were located in urban areas, while seven of the programs (29.17%) were located in suburban areas. There was only one program (4.17%) located in a rural area. These results showed that approximately 70% of the preschool and childcare programs included in this study were located in urban areas and their program types were not specified.

### Expulsion and Suspension Policies

The length of the expulsion and suspension section of the behavioral policies varied across the 24 preschool and childcare programs. The number of words for the policies ranged from 62 to 803, and the average number of words was 261. Across the 24 programs' policy statements, 151 units of data analysis were identified and coded under the three major categories that emerged from data analyses: (1) *child*, (2) *program*, and (3) *families*. Each major category involves sub-categories with distinct and unique themes. Over half of the units were coded under *program* related themes (e.g., program efforts, goodness of fit), while approximately 25% of the units were coded under *family* related themes (e.g., communication) and 20% of the units were related to *child* behaviors. Table 1 shows details on the categories with definitions and percentage data for the number of units coded with each category. The categories are described with further details in the following sections.

### Child

Slightly over 20% of the units ( $n = 32/151$ , 21.19%) were coded with *Child* related themes: *Child-behavior* and *Child-not function*. These themes show that children may be terminated or suspended due to their *behaviors* or their inability to successfully *function* in their program. *Child-behavior* accounted for 18.54% of the units. Some statements on child-behavior were specific, such as "aggression toward other children or teachers, disruption of normal classroom function, destruction of school property, non-compliance with classroom rules." While other statements referred to the general safety of the classroom environment, such as "behavior that puts children and staff at risk" or "child becomes a danger to themselves or others." One program wrote, "behavioral problems that result in physical harm to other children and/or behaviors that result in frequent physical restraint of the child." Although *Child-not function* accounted only for 2.65% of the units, these statements did not specifically describe "challenging behaviors" and they included phrases, such as "a child is not able to function in a group setting" and "inability of a child to adjust to the program after a reasonable amount of time."

### Program

Over a half of the units ( $n = 80/151$  units, 52.98%) were coded with *Program* related themes: *Goodness of fit*, *Program effort*, *Last resort*, *Program rights*, *Child preparation*, and *Re-enrollment opportunity*. Statements related to *Goodness of fit* comprised 16.56% of the units. The phrase "good fit" was used in several policies (e.g., "if a child's behavior proves to not be a good fit for the school."). Some policies discussed the idea of goodness of fit through statements centering on the needs of the child (e.g., "the needs of the child have exceeded what the staff at [this] School is able to offer."), whereas other policies put the focus on the program's abilities, such as "the center still does not meet the needs of the child" and "it cannot reasonably accommodate the needs of the child." Another program wrote, "the child has a disability or special need which requires specific accommodations that present an undue burden to the program." Lastly, some programs also described goodness of fit regarding the needs of the child specifically in terms of the amount of one-on-one staffing the child requires. For example, "the determination that a child's needs cannot be met within the staffing structure."

*Program effort* accounted for 11.92% of the units and dealt with specific actions a program would take in response to a child demonstrating challenging behaviors. The types of efforts were different across each policy, with some programs including multiple steps and some just one. The steps

**Table 1** Categories with definitions and frequency

Category	Sub-Category	Definition/Example	Frequency (n = 151)
Child	Child-Behavior	Descriptions of a child's behavior that may result in termination (e.g., challenging, disruptive, aggressive, and disrespectful behavior, and a threat to safety)	28 (18.54%)
	Child-Not function	Inability of a child to successfully function or adjust to the program environment (e.g., "not able to successfully adjust to group care in that the child's emotional well-being is determined to be at risk")	4 (2.65%)
Program	Goodness of fit	A center's inability to meet a child's need or to provide appropriate support, including a mismatch between the needs of the child and the support that the center can provide (e.g., demanding excessive staffing and one-on-one support, and other classroom resources)	25 (16.56%)
	Program effort	Procedural efforts that a center will follow through on in response to a child's behavior (e.g., documentations of a child's behaviors, referral process, consultations, pursuing options for supportive services, and developing behavioral support plan)	18 (11.92%)
	Program Rights	Specified entitlements of the program within the expulsion process (e.g., who holds the right to terminate enrollment and under what circumstances and referencing rights under legal statutes)	13 (8.61%)
	Last Resort	Indicating expulsion as the last choice, as the program has used all the strategies and resources at their disposal to support a student before termination is considered an option (e.g., "rarely used" or "exhausted all possibilities")	13 (8.61%)
	Child preparation	Helping children understand why they are leaving the program (e.g., "prepare that child for that termination/suspension in a positive manner"), and preparing their peers for the transition (e.g., a farewell snack or group art project for the child)	7 (4.64%)
	Re-enrollment opportunity	Describing an opportunity and a procedure for the child to return to the program if a set of criteria (e.g., if parents follow through with referral or there are proven changes in behavior) have been met	4 (2.65%)
	Family	Communication	The different ways in which the policy outlines their procedures for communicating with families regarding the child's behavior or impending suspension/termination (e.g., parent-teacher conferences, sharing documentation of child behavior, sending written notices of termination and written recommendations, etc.)
Ultimatums		Considering family refusal to follow through with a service referral as grounds for termination (e.g., "failure of the parents/guardians to follow through on [the program's] 'Procedure for Referral Services for Children'")	5 (3.31%)
Other		Not fitting any of the categories (e.g., "parents who are dissatisfied with the center's decision may appeal to the executive committee.")	1 (0.66%)

included documenting child behavior, creating a behavior plan, and supporting with service referrals. For example, one program wrote:

To develop a behavior plan that can be used at school and in the child's home. Documentation will be kept by the teacher, tracking the child's behavior and how the behavior plan is working. The teacher and/or Director will decide with the parent if an outside referral is necessary.

Whereas another program wrote, "following the [center's] procedure for referral of children for additional services."

The sub-category, *last resort*, comprised 8.61% of the units. Last resort refers to statements within the policy that indicate expulsion is only used if a program has exhausted other options. For example, one program explained that "termination from the program is a rarely used last resort when we have exhausted all possibilities of meeting the child or family's needs in conjunction with the needs of the program." Another program wrote, "we will take every step possible to avoid the suspension or termination of your child due to a challenging behavior."

*Program rights* also accounted for 8.61% of the units and referred to who held the power to terminate enrollment and under what circumstances, if any, they were allowed to

do so. Most programs used phrases such as, “[the] center reserves the option to terminate an enrollment contract” or “[the school] reserves the right to terminate the enrollment contract.” Whereas other programs wrote statements such as, “at the sole discretion of the administration” and “the center in its sole and unfettered discretion.” In some cases, programs also attached a set of circumstances around the use of their ability to expel. For example, “the center in its sole and unfettered discretion determines a child is placing other children or staff at risk.”

Statements regarding *child preparation* accounted for 4.64% of the units. These statements contained information about how program staff would inform children of their expulsion and, in some cases, how they would handle the situation with the rest of the class. For example, one program wrote, “if a child is terminated from the program, he/she will be prepared in a manner consistent with his/her ability to understand.” Only two programs included peers in their child preparation statements. One of those programs wrote, “when a child is leaving the Center, the classroom teacher will make an attempt to prepare the child and the other children for the departure of the child. It is suggested that there be a farewell snack or a group art project for the child.”

*Re-enrollment opportunity* accounted for 2.65% of the units and refers to statements made by the program that outline conditions for the child’s potential return to the center. Some programs allow for a child’s return with evidence of change. For example:

The child who is suspended may return the following school year if the action plan has worked for this child, but only on a two-week trial basis. If after the two weeks the child proves to have not grown, then they will be asked to not attend [the] preschool again.

In another example, a program wrote, “if termination is unavoidable the parent may contact the Director about re-enrollment if, after seeking support for the child’s behavior, there has been some improvement or there is evidence that a consistent behavior plan is working.” Another program included a statement about re-enrollment in their written notice of termination. The program wrote, “it will also state the conditions for a child’s return if there is a return.” This statement was included in the program’s written notice of termination.

### Family

In all, 25% of the units ( $n=38/151$ , 25.17%) were coded with two family-related themes: *Communication* and *Ultimatums*. *Communication* accounted for 21.85% of the units

and involved statements about procedures for program-parent contact. Some programs wrote statements about conducting meetings with parents in response to challenging behaviors. For example, “a meeting will be held with the parent/guardian to discuss those concerns” and “when difficulties arise, the staff and the Director will consult, and a parent conference will be scheduled.” Communication also refers to program’s written notices of termination, such as, “provides the parent(s) with written notification of termination of enrollment” and “if a decision to terminate enrollment is made, the Director will notify parents in writing.”

*Ultimatums* comprised 3.31% of all units. Ultimatums occur when a program states that parents have to follow through with a certain action, such as a service referral, or their child will be expelled. For example, some programs wrote, “failure of parents/guardian to follow through with a referral program recommended by staff and/or director” and “failure to follow through on a recommendation for referral” as part of their reasons for termination. Another program stated:

If parents do not agree to have their child evaluated or if they do not follow up on requests for permission for an evaluation at the school after two meetings where this request has been made, the parents will be given a deadline for taking action. The child will be terminated if the deadline is not met.

One program also wrote, “failure of the child’s parents or guardians to cooperate with the center, which the center determines in its sole and unfettered discretion, is serious enough to warrant termination,” which is an ultimatum that encompasses more general parent behavior.

### Other

There was one code (0.66%) which did not fit within the *child*, *program*, or *family*, and was categorized as *other*. The program wrote, “parents who are dissatisfied with the Center’s decision may appeal to the executive committee.” No other suspension and termination policies included statements about an appeal process. The appeal process is not considered a re-enrollment opportunity because it relates more to the parents’ response to termination than the program allowing a child back.

### Similarities and Differences in the Policies

To compare similarities and differences in the expulsion and suspension policies from the 24 preschool and child-care programs, information on the number of words of each expulsion and suspension policy and the categories coded in

the policy was organized in Table 2. Then, percentage data were calculated for the number of programs coded with each sub-category (See Fig. 1). As shown in Table 2; Fig. 1, most of the ECE programs ( $n = 21/24$ , 87.5%) included “communicating with families” about children’s challenging behaviors and expulsion/suspension procedures. The majority of the programs ( $n = 19/24$ , 79.17%) also noted that they could suggest a termination or suspension due to “challenging behaviors.” Approximately, 70% of the programs described that they would suggest a termination if their program was not a “good fit” ( $n = 16/24$ , 66.67%). Over a half of the programs documented what “efforts” ( $n = 14/24$ , 58.33%) they would make before terminating or suspending a child, and they used expulsion as a “last resort” ( $n = 12/24$ , 50%).

## Discussion

Among the 111 ECE programs that met the search criteria for this study, only a quarter of the programs ( $n = 31/111$ , 27.93%) made their behavior policies publicly available on their websites. The limited access to the behavior policies presents a barrier to prospective parents’ ability to thoroughly review the quality of ECE programs through their policies and procedures without contacting the programs (Doolittle et al., 2007). Among the 31 programs, 24 programs (77.42%) contained sections on expulsion (or termination) and suspension in their behavioral policies, and how each program describes expulsion and suspension varies across the programs. The absence of behavior policy information may alienate prospective parents of children who have been expelled previously, as they have already experienced the various negative impacts of expulsion (Wahman et al., 2022). Additionally, the limited information around the expulsion and suspension process makes it difficult for parents of children who are at risk for being expelled to understand how they can proactively support their child and communicate with the program.

Our analyses of expulsion and suspension policies revealed that most of the preschool and childcare programs noted “challenging behavior” and “goodness of fit” as reasons for terminating a child. The programs also described how they would “communicate with families” and what “efforts” they would make to document the child’s behavior and develop behavioral support plans or referral services. The communication, program efforts, and referral statements within the behavior policies, align with research evidence on key components of the expulsion process (Martin et al., 2018). Half of the programs also indicate that they would use expulsion as the “last resort” and the programs have “the right” to make such a decision on terminating a child. Some of the programs offer opportunities for re-enrollment

of the expelled child and for preparing the child and other peers before the termination.

However, some language used in the policies included terms and phrases that were vague and subjective. For example, what constitutes “a good fit” or “challenging behaviors” is not always defined. A child’s inability to “function” successfully in a group setting is also vague. This lack of clarity has the potential to result in programs using expulsion when it isn’t warranted, such as terminating enrollment instead of providing behavioral support (Gilliam, 2006; Miller et al., 2017). While leaving room for interpretation can be beneficial for reviewing situations on a case-by-case basis, it also provides an opportunity for misuse of or justification for expulsion. For example, if the person who wrote the policy is not the same person who is responsible for enforcing it (e.g., through program director turnover), then the person enforcing it may misinterpret when to expel a student because of the vague language.

Language regarding a child’s behavior as a threat to safety and security were at the forefront of the behavior policies across most of the participating ECE programs. This demonstrated that protecting students, staff, and property can be used as a justification for behavior related expulsion. In the current study, most of the programs (87.5%) addressed that they would “communicate with families” about the child’s behaviors. However, almost 42% of the programs used language such as “reserves the right” and “sole and unfettered discretion.” These statements give programs the power to decide what exactly is a threat to safety and security, and leaves little room for the families to question that decision. The inclusion of written notices of termination and the reason for termination also serves to protect the program against disgruntled families (i.e., if a family wants to sue), and may make it more difficult for families to advocate for their child against a program’s decision to expel their child. This is contradictory to family-centered practices that emphasize responsiveness to each family’s unique circumstances and provide families complete and unbiased information to make informed decisions in their children’s education (DEC, 2014).

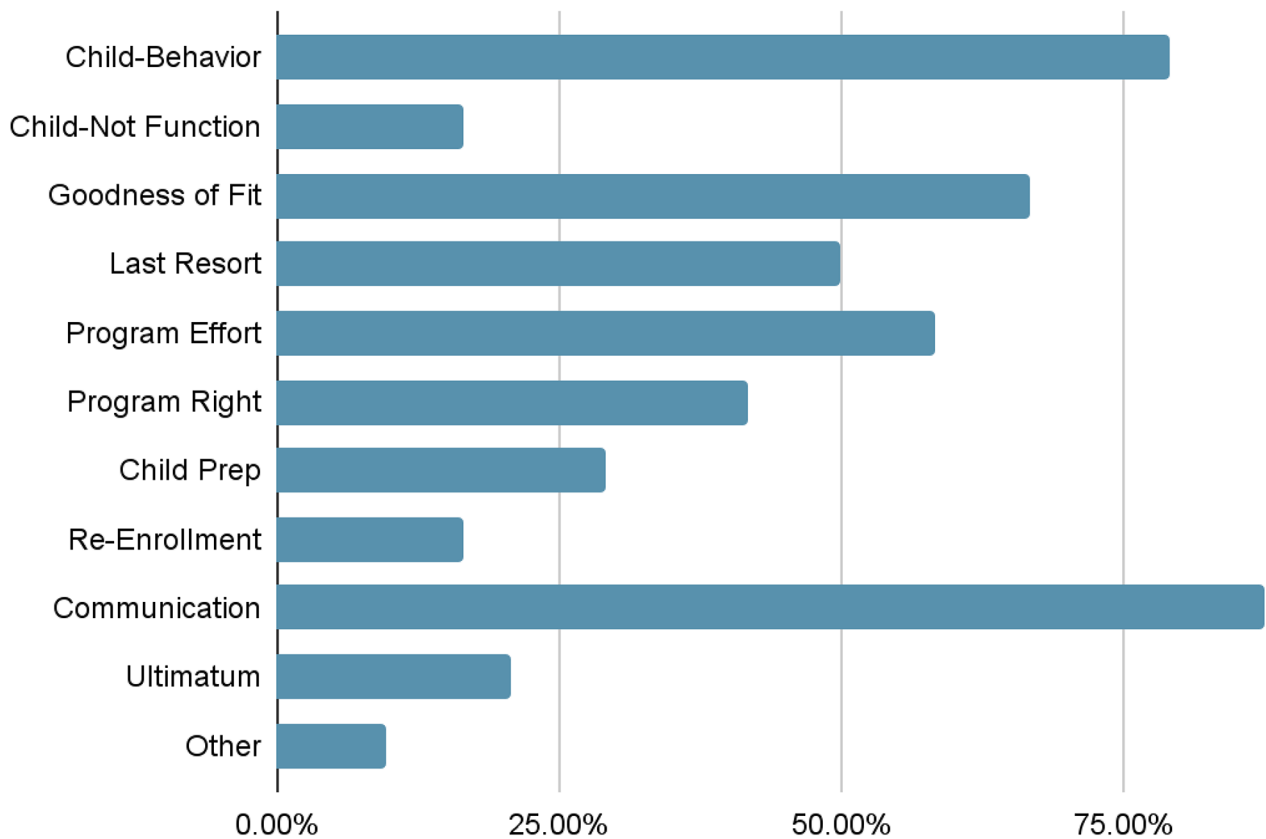
Of particular concern is the ways in which the language used in the termination and suspension policies positions the child as a problem, when expulsion itself is an adult decision and not a child behavior (Gilliam & Reyes, 2018). For example, when describing how a child transitions into the classroom setting, the phrase “failure of the child” is used. This suggests that the child is at fault for the situation and ignores the fact that additional support or environmental changes may be needed. It places the onus solely on the child for adjusting to a childcare setting. One program described the child’s needs as an “undue burden”, which centers the problem within the child. Labeling a child as a



**Table 2** Participating program information and categories coded in each program's policy

Program	Number of words <sup>a</sup>	Category/Sub-Category														
		Child				Program				Family				Other		
		Child-Behavior	Child-not Function	Goodness of Fit	Last Resort	Program Effort	Program Right	Child Prep	Re-Enroll	Communication	Ultimatum					
1	111	x		x										x		
2	254	x	x	x		x						x		x		x
3	242	x	x	x		x								x		x
4	135	x		x		x										
5	308	x		x		x					x			x		
6	466	x		x		x					x			x		
7	218	x		x										x		
8	110													x		
9	62	x		x												
10	109			x										x		
11	269			x							x			x		
12	387	x		x										x		
13	149	x		x										x		
14	242	x												x		
15	347	x									x			x		
16	116			x							x			x		
17	144	x		x												
18	255	x		x							x					
19	432	x	x	x							x					
20	377	x		x							x			x		
21	154	x		x										x		
22	196	x		x							x					
23	803	x		x							x					
24	382	x		x							x					

<sup>a</sup>number of words for each program's expulsion/suspension policy document



**Fig. 1** Percentage data for the number of the programs ( $n=24$ ) coded with each category

failure or a burden at a young age is problematic, and may negatively impact the child's social-emotional development and their self-esteem (DEC, 2017). The mindset of "we cannot sacrifice the education of the whole class because of the disruptive behavior of one student," as written in one of the reviewed policies, creates a dangerous precedent where education is available to only those children who conform to society's expectation of appropriate behavior. To support all children in ECE settings, it is necessary to shift our thinking from a child as a failure or a burden to a child as a learner to appropriately address an unmet need.

With that being said, a few programs did take into consideration the emotional impact that abruptly leaving a program may have on the child and their peers by including statements about preparing the child for the transition. Some programs also wrote statements that included the child's peers as part of the transition out of the program. The inclusion of statements focused on preparing the child and their peers signals that the effects of expulsion extend beyond just the child being expelled. Although a few programs briefly described how they would prepare the children (e.g., farewell), the preparation does not include support for the child's re-enrollment and it might be ironic, as the child's leaving

is a result of punitive and exclusionary practice that pushes the child out the door of their program (NAEYC, 2016). Also, over 60% of the units of analysis were focused on the theme, *program*, as opposed to the *children* or *families*. This shows that the focus of the termination and suspension policies tends to be on the programs' needs, actions, and rights, which are in line with findings from prior research that found behavior policies do not focus on developing social and emotional competence for young children (Longstreth et al., 2013).

Additionally, the majority of the programs describe that they would communicate with families. However, there is limited information on how families can be involved in the decision-making process, and what steps families can take to protect their children and appeal to their educational needs. This points to a potential power dynamic where the programs hold more rights than the families enrolled in their center, as these policies outline program efforts, but provide little to no information on what the families can do. Relatedly, many programs in the current study indicated that they could expel a child and justify their decision as a last resort. These results show that expulsion is used by the program's decision and justified as a form of behavior management,

despite much effort from several leading organizations (DEC, 2017; NAYEC, 2016; U.S Department of Health and Human Services/the U.S Department of Education, 2014) to stop exclusionary practices in ECE settings.

### Implications for Research

Based on the findings from this study, there are multiple implications for research related to behavior policies and connecting policy to practice. First, as this study included only programs from Western Massachusetts, the small sample size may impact the generalizability of the results. Therefore, future research should build on the findings of this study by exploring behavior policies on a state and national level that include diverse settings, as punitive and exclusionary practices could have more negative influence on young children of color (DEC, 2017). In fact, several studies have shown that children's race was related to the expulsion rates (Gilliam, 2005; Giordano et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2018). In addition to race, disability status, gender, and adverse childhood experiences are also linked to expulsion rates and should be considered in future research on behavior policies (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2018; Zeng et al., 2019; Zeng et al., 2021).

As this study only analyzed the expulsion/suspension component of the policies, future research needs to analyze the overall quality of the behavior policies and connect the behavior policies and expulsion procedures of the program. For example, it would be necessary to compare written expulsion policies with expulsion rates in ECE programs and to identify to what degree the policies influence educators' decisions in expulsion (i.e., is expulsion being used as a last resort or are programs following through with ultimatums?). To date, researchers have examined the expulsion rates (Gilliam, 2005; Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Giordano et al., 2021; Zeng et al., 2019, 2021) and educators' experiences with expulsion (Gilliam & Reyes, 2018; Miller et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2018; Silver and Zinsser, 2020). Several researchers have studied behavior policies in ECE settings (Longstreth et al., 2013; Garrity et al., 2016, 2017). However, there is no information on the degree to which the behavior policies influence the expulsion practices in ECE settings. Therefore, looking at the relation between behavior policies and expulsion practices would be an important topic for future research.

Lastly, future research should also take into consideration how families view the process of expulsion outlined in the behavior policies to uncover how collaboration with families can be strengthened, as the family perspective is needed in expulsion research (Martin et al., 2018). As shown in the results from the current study, many of the participating

programs indicate that the child's behavior and goodness of fit were reasons for expulsion and the programs have the right for the expulsion decision. Thus, using parent interviews or surveys would allow for more in-depth analysis on families' experiences during the expulsion process, or families' perspectives on the programs' behavior policies. These data will help us better understand how families can collaborate with programs to achieve mutually agreed upon outcomes and goals that most effectively promote children's development (DEC, 2014).

### Implications for Practice

Findings from this study have highlighted multiple implications for practice regarding the written behavior policies. First, program staff should ensure that their behavior policies are easily accessible for prospective parents to promote transparency and further define the program's philosophy. Second, programs should work to evaluate the quality of their written behavior policies by using proven evaluation tools such as with the *TAGPEC* (Garrity et al., 2016; Garrity et al., 2017). Following this evaluation, programs need to remove or further restrict exclusionary practices (i.e., expulsion) from their behavior policies and replace them with evidence-based strategies such as mental health consultation (Gilliam, 2005) that promote social and emotional well-being (Garrity et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2018). The DEC position statement on challenging behavior (DEC, 2017) also suggests that ECE programs be thoughtful and intentional in crafting policy statements to specifically describe positive guidance for children with challenging behaviors and eliminate expulsion and suspension. Given that Black males (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2018) and children with disabilities (Zeng et al., 2019) experience expulsion at higher rates it is necessary for programs to ensure that their behavior policies are anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-ableist.

Although communication with families was a central component to the behavior policies, the content of those statements did not include details on how to engage effectively with families, especially when there were disagreements. Collaboration between programs and schools is critical to reducing a child's risk for expulsion (O'Grady & Ostrosky, 2023; Zulauf-McCurdy & Zinsser, 2021). In some cases, the program and the parents may have differing perspectives on a child's behavior and whether that behavior could be considered challenging (Martin et al., 2018). Therefore, programs should outline procedures for ongoing communication with families and work as a team to identify the skills needed for children to successfully navigate their day (Classen & Cheatham, 2015).

Teacher training programs also can present an opportunity for pre-service and in-service teachers to learn how to address challenging behaviors in the classroom as a way to decrease reliance on expulsion as a behavior management strategy. Coursework should include helping pre-service teachers develop the necessary skills for communicating effectively with parents, as well as building empathy for families, as teachers' perceptions of families play a role in expulsion decisions (Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). Additionally, teacher training programs, including professional development programs, focused on evidenced-based behavior support strategies (e.g., the Pyramid Model, a classroom-based system for promoting social and emotional competence in young children) and social and emotional learning would help pre-service and in-service teachers to develop skills and confidence in preventing and addressing challenging behaviors (Zinsser et al., 2019; Vinh et al., 2016). Teacher perceptions of behavior are rooted in behavioral and cultural expectations (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Therefore, it is crucial that teacher training and professional development address potential biases surrounding behavior.

### Limitations and Conclusion

There are several limitations with the design of this study. First, this study relies solely on information present on the program's website. There is a possibility that program websites are not routinely updated and so they may not accurately reflect their current program policies. It is also possible that there is a logistical component to why behavior policies are not posted on program websites, as opposed to just not wanting that information public. Addressing these logistical barriers was beyond the scope of this study but should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results. Despite the limitations discussed above, results of this study contributes to the current body of research on behavior policies in ECE by identifying how behavior policies frame the topic of expulsion, how the process of expulsion is explained, and how readily available that information is. Expulsion is not an intervention, and it pushes a child out the door of their ECE programs (NAEYC, 2016). Reducing rates of expulsion starts with understanding how policy works to enable expulsion practices (Garrity et al., 2016). The lack of information that is provided on expulsion procedures opens the door for programs to rely too heavily on expulsion as a behavior management strategy, as other strategies are not codified in writing.

### Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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